ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE E7
NEW YORK TIMES
16 November 1986

The Iran Connection

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WASHINGTON

IN the soothing tones that have lubricated his entire Presidency, Ronald Reagan sidestepped the carping politicians, columnists and diplomats last week and took his case on Iran directly to the American people. In 12 minutes on television, he offered his version of a remarkable 18 months of secret diplomacy and arms sales to a country that his Administration had denounced as a font of terrorism and anti-American fanaticism.

The President's talk contained internal contradictions that seemed to neutralize his denials that arms had been traded for American hostages. He had "authorized the transfer of small amounts of defensive weapons and spare parts for defensive systems to Iran," he said, "for the simplest and best of reasons," namely, to woo that country back into a relationship with the United States that would spell the end of its support for terrorism.

"We did not — repeat, did not — trade weapons or anything else for hostages — nor will we," he added, just minutes after explaining: "The most significant step which Iran could take, we indicated, would be to use its influence in Lebanon to secure the release of all hostages held there." He did not mention arms deliveries by Israel to Iran, reportedly made at American request and timed to the release of three hostages who were held by a pro-Iranian group in Lebanon. Nor did he mention the role of the Central Intelligence Agency; but the day after the he spoke, the White House acknowledged that the agency had been directly involved. And despite a Will Rogers line he quoted about truth staying put longer than rumor, Mr. Reagan did not rebut "rumors" he said had been spread by the press about the secret weapons shipments.

But the President's message went beyond his words. As he warmed to the camera in his masterly style, he seemed to exude confidence that the public, wanting to trust him, would engage in what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief." In current parlance, the question was whether Mr. Reagan could maintain his reputation as the "Teflon President" to whom no criticism sticks.

But judging by the criticism from both conservatives and liberals, Middle East experts and some officials in the White House and State Department, the Iran matter threatened to push Mr. Reagan toward the lame-duck status that often plagues a President's last two years in office. He faced rough going anyway with the Democrats having just won a majority in the Senate. Now, it seems, he may have added to that political difficulty problems born of damaged credibility, uncoordinated decision-making and incoherence in foreign policy.

Consequently, ideological adversaries found themselves in rare accord last week. Senator Barry Goldwater, the conservative Republican from Arizona, called the military shipments to Iran "a dreadful mistake, probably one of the major mistakes the United States has ever made in foreign policy." Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, the leader of the new Democratic majority, saw it as a "major foreign relations blunder." Secretary of State George P. Shultz, whose diplomats were pressing European allies to withhold arms as American equipment was being delivered secretly, was reported to have opposed the operation, along with Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger.

The credibility factor had implications beyond Washington politics. Some pro-Western Arab leaders who had believed Secretary Shultz's assurance of American neutrality in the six-year-old Iran-Iraq war were reportedly seething over what they saw as deception. Although Mr. Reagan hoped his opening to Teheran would, as he put it, "bring an honorable end" to that conflict, he offered no hint of how that might be accomplished by providing Iran with weapons. Further, Middle East experts wondered what impact the secret deliveries would have on the tough image Mr. Reagan has cultivated against state-supported terrorism.

As if to counter the impression of softness, the Administration announced limited sanctions against Syria, which was found in a London trial to have conspired in a failed attempt to blow up an Israeli El Al jet. Britain, which broke relations with Syria, was keeping its distance from Mr. Reagan's Iran policy. But France, which has maintained relations with Damascus, was rewarded last week by the release of two French hostages who had been held in Lebanon by a pro-Syrian group.

The Administration's credibility problems predated the Iran controversy. They began earlier this fall with reports that the White House had mapped a disinformation campaign last summer to plant false stories in the press that Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya was planning new terrorist attacks; the leaks hinted at further American military action.

Then in September, officials contended that no swap had occured when an accused Soviet spy was released in New York as an American journalist was set free in Moscow. And when a weapons-laden plane with an American crew was shot down over Nicaragua, the Administration denied any involvement, although such aid to the Administration-backed Nicaraguan rebels had long been coordinated from the White House by Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, a National Security Council official.

Discretion and Sensitivity

Colonel North was also reportedly involved in the surreptitious Iran connection, which the National Security Council apparently undertook without consulting the Middle East experts in the State Department and the Pentagon. President Reagan confirmed that his former national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, had gone secretly to Teheran to meet with Iranian factions in an operation overseen by the present national security adviser, Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter.

Cutting out Congress and the foreign policy establishment from such a momentous change had the advantage of keeping the secret to a small circle of officials. "There was a basic requirement for discretion," Mr. Reagan said, "and for a sensitivity to the situation in the nation we were attempting to engage." The method also dodged the ambiguities usually raised by specialists.

At least some of them doubted that the President's tactics would work. Nobody denied Iran's strategic importance, both because of its oil deposits and its "critical geography," in the President's words, between the Soviet Union and the Indian Ocean. The question is how to restore American influence. Mr. Reagan evidently accepted the Israeli argument that Washington could bolster pro-Western Iranians through arms sales. But there is no guarantee that such factions can be identified and trusted, or that weaponry can be an effective instrument for addressing the subtleties of a Middle Eastern country's internal politics.